

An Ideal Temple-Priest

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Sivamayam
Sri Mahadeva Jayam

AN IDEAL TEMPLE-PRIEST

(A short story by Sri K. G. Mallya)

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After offering a collective prayer, the trustees of the temple went to the conference chamber to chalk out the program during the forthcoming car festival spread over five days.

As soon as everyone sat down comfortably, Venkanna, one of the trustees, stood up and said, “Friends, as usual the first day’s pooja to the deity will be offered by me and I will bear all the expenses!” Before he finished his last word, from the opposite seat, suddenly Ramanna, another trustee, stood up and said, “Friends, this time, the first day’s pooja should be mine. Why should Venkanna have that privilege every year? When all of us are trustees of equal standing it should be the privilege of everyone to have it by turn!”

“But, “Venkanna said, “you know, ever since the temple is here it has been the tradition of our family to bear the expenses of the first day’s pooja. My grandfather did it. My father followed it and I have been carrying on the tradition for years. Please don’t come in the way! If you like, offer the pooja on the next day as usual!”

But Ramanna seemed adamant. Raising his voice, he shouted: “A temple is a public institution. Nobody should have any right or monopoly here!” The other trustees looked at each other, surprised.

“Why!” An elderly person among them asked, “why should there be so much of competition?”

But...I don’t allow him to have it this time!” a stubborn Ramanna said.

“I too will not allow you to have it!” an equally stubborn Venkanna returned.

A few joined Ramanna’s side and the remaining trustees Venkanna’s. For the first time a split came to surface and trying to avoid it, the elderly trustees Ranganna advised, “Brothers, this is a temple – the sacred place of worship. There should not be any rivalry or ‘politics’ here. You must know God is someone above all these petty-mindedness!” But his words were drowned in their shouts. With tears in his eyes, Ranganna said again, “Brothers, Shiva came and dwelt in this temple listening to the prayers of our forefathers. When you quarrel like this I am afraid he may even leave this place for ever. Pray don’t quarrel! God blesses peace-loving people and curses the quarrelsome....!”

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“But, the first day’s pooja is the right of my family! I don’t want to renounce it!”

“Let me see how you’ll exercise your right!” Again a challenge! After some time, the exchange of hot words, turned into personal abuses and the meeting was wound up abruptly with an announcement from both the sides, “There will not be any car festival this year!”

Ranganna went to the priest and said, “Bhattre, this time there will be no car festival!”

“Why!” Priest Keshava Bhatta asked greatly astonished.

“You know, these trustees, Venkanna and Ramanna, are rivals in their trade. They brought personal rivalry into the temple, barked like dogs and made a mess!”

“But how can you stop the car festival!” Keshava Bhatta asked innocently: “It is an annual feature and people from all the nearby villages come in hundreds. Will they not become unhappy and go back disappointed if there is no festival?”

“But, Bhattre,” Ranganna said, “You know both of them are giants. All these years they are the two persons who have been sharing all the expenses equally! When they are quarrelling among themselves who can bear the expense and have the festival?”

“But the festival cannot stop!” Looking fixedly at the *Shivalinga* the priest declared: “My Shiva will have the festival as usual. I want this village should prosper and I want more and more people should visit the temple and win His grace...!”

Ranganna asked, “How are you going to have it?”

“He will guide if He desires! After all we are only instruments in His hands!”

To Ranganna it seemed a mystery.

Waving camphor Keshava Bhatta finished the afternoon pooja and in a dejected mood returned home.

“Why do you look so sad today?” his wife, Saraswati asked.

“What can I say?” Keshava Bhatta told in a voice full of agony: “The trustees quarreled among themselves and decided not to have the annual car festival!”

“What?” she gaped unbelievingly; “No car festival? How can they treat God like that?”

“That’s what I am telling! Everybody knows all about Lord Shiva’s prowess. If He opens His third eyes out of anger all the three worlds will be reduced to ashes in a moment. Because of their wealth those merchants must have become blind to this very fact...”

“But, you know, “Keshava Bhatta slowly said, after sometime “I have challenged that we are going to have the festival at all cost!”

“That is a good decision!”

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“Yes! But we must have money – at least Rs. 2,500 for flowers, festoons, fireworks and feasts!”

“Why do you worry! God is always great! He may give us latter in a different form. Come on, take this!” Saying so without any delay Saraswati took out her gold bangles, ear rings, chain and even the sacred ‘thali.’

Keeping them before him, she said, “Kindly sell and from the sale proceeds organize the car festival!”

Keshava Bhatta did not believe his eyes! He looked at his wife fixedly and then putting them together in his shawl went straight to the goldsmith.

As usual, the car festival – the annual event in the village – drew huge crowds but none of the trustees except Ranganna participated.

The decorated idol of Lord Shiva was taken out in a grand procession and at night it was seated on the tall “Brahma Ratha” and hundreds of villagers drew the ‘ratha’ around the temple. Clay lamps adorned the temple ‘gopuram’ and the fireworks were a big attraction. In a jovial mood everyone invoked the blessings of Lord Shiva. After the night-long program, the idol was taken back to the *Sanctum sanctorum* and kept back on the usual pedestal below the Shivalinga. To mark the end of the celebrations when camphor was waved in the early morning. Keshava Bhatta’s eyes became wet. He prostrated before the deity and said, “Lord, you have done it! But what about the next year if these trustees behave like this? Why can’t you grant them wisdom?”

The month of Vaishakha fled away and with it the summer, too. In Ashadha the rainy season set in. In the beginning there were light showers and after a week, without any pause it started raining heavily, with frequent thunder and lightning. The sky remained overcast and there was no trace of the sun. Braving the rain, however, Keshava Bhatta was going to the temple regularly to offer pooja three times a day.

After four days suddenly the villagers found that the river bordering the village had swollen, and in all its fury the flood waters had started entering the village. As they watched, minute by minute the water level rose and before long there was water everywhere.

To save their lives, the villagers ran to a nearby hill leaving behind everything.

Next three days there was torrential rain. And from the top of the hill the villagers could see their entire village looking like a vast lake. Everything was under water except the Gopuram of the temple!

At that moment of crisis everybody remembered Shiva and Keshava Bhatta looking fixedly at the Gopuram offered prayer after prayer invoking Shiva’s grace but the rain seemed unrelenting.

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An elderly person openly declared that it was Shiva's fury that had brought in so much of calamity to them. The two trustees Venkanna and Ramanna remembered that fateful day when they quarreled in the temple. "Oh God, forgive us this time! We shall never repeat it again! They repented!

On the tenth day the rains receded and so also the flood waters. By evening the tide had rolled back and the villagers climbing down the hill slowly entered the village. Though the entire village was under water, they were amazed to see that the flood had not caused much damage and almost everything was intact! "All this could be possible only because of Shiva's grace!" they thought and to offer Him prayers collectively the villagers enthusiastically walked towards the temple led by Keshava Bhatta. But when they reached the temple square, all their enthusiasm vanished as, to their sight came only the 'gopuram' of the temple standing on four robust pillars and everything else – the Shiva linga, the idol of Shiva, lamps, candelabras – had been washed away, beyond anybody's imagination!

"Shiva! Shiva! What is this!" Keshava Bhatta was about to swoon away when all others bowed down their head knowing not what to do!

"Shiva, I never thought that you would do it!", Keshava Bhatta lamented, "What made you leave all of us? Did you observe that we are not sincere and earnest in our devotion to you?"

Ranganna came forward and consoled, Bhattre, Shiva's kindness has no limit. See, how he spared everybody's home while allowing His own to be washed away! Let all of us join together, rebuild His temple and install another *Shiva linga*!"

"Yes! Yes! We will do it! Hara! Hara! Mahadeva!" Everybody cheered. But Keshava Bhatta felt that he had lost his heart. For a while he spoke not a word. After some time in a feeble tone he said, "Saraswati, without Shiva I can't live. The villagers have banished and rendered Him homeless...!" One by one the villagers left the place but Bhatta thought of staying on there.

A month elapsed. The trustees thought of reconstructing the temple. Cart-loads of sand, granite, lime, timber and other things were brought and stored. In the meantime, Keshava Bhatta was spending sleepless nights.

It was a full moon's day and the sky was clear and the full moon was shining in all splendor. Bhatta sat watching the moon and when the moon had crossed the middle of the sky he developed a strange urge: "Without Shiva I must not live on and let me commit suicide!" He stood up and thought of plunging into the river: "Yes! Let me jump into the same river that swallowed my Shiva!"

He decided and ran to the river! On reaching the bank full of trees and shrubs he stood there for a while looking at the water flowing gently reflecting thousands of moons. He got down the bank chanting "Shiva! Shiva!" and his feet touched warm water. Chanting he waded further and further into the water getting deeper and deeper and when the water touched his

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shoulder, suddenly his right leg touched something beneath. With his fingers he held his nose tightly lest water should enter his nostrils and went down in the water to find out what it was. His fingers ran on a smooth object and before long Keshava Bhatta could feel and recognize what it was!

He stood erect jubilantly and shouted cheerfully; “How fortunate I am to find out my Shiva secretly hiding here! Shiva, are you really angry with us?”

With both of his arms he devoutly pulled the large Shiva linga to the bank and, sending high joyous shouts about the find, he ran to the village!

[*Editor's Note:* We have great pleasure in reproducing here, for the benefit of our readers, this story from Bhavan's Journal, VOL. XXIV. No. 13, Jan. 29, 1973, with grateful acknowledgements, original title of this story is “THE DELUGE”. - ANGIRASAN]
